

Diasporas, or the logics of cultural translation*

Diásporas, ou a lógica da tradução cultural

STUART HALL

I begin with an apology for speaking in a foreign language. Since I understand that there are thirty percent more Portuguese words for every English sentence, I will try to speak very slowly, on pain of death by my translators.

Thanks for the invitation to address so distinguished a body of Brazilian scholars. I wish to express our sincere gratitude on behalf of my wife, Catherine, and myself, for the warmth, kindness and generosity with which we have been received.

I was uncertain whether to start this talk at the beginning or the end. However, in the spirit of a Machado de Assis' novel, *Epitaph of a Small Winner*, which, as you know, is a story written by an author after his own death, I have chosen to begin with a footnote. This is the story – until now little known and never before revealed by me – of the role of Bahia in the development of Cultural Studies. As Cultural Studies has become a world-wide, transnational field of inquiry, many newly-emerging schools have felt it necessary to dispute, challenge and dismantle what they see as the Birmingham Centre for Cultural Studies' claims of origin. This act of liberation – or patricidal tendency, depending on your place and point of view – usually takes the form of discovering that Cultural Studies were, *in fact*, actually invented elsewhere, long before the field was first named at the University of Birmingham in 1964. I not only fully agree with this post-structuralist tendency to deconstruct all foundational claims. I want to make a little foray in that direction myself.

When I went to England from Jamaica to study in 1951 – a date which, incidentally, coincides with the onset of the mass migration from the Caribbean to the UK which marked the beginning of the post-war black diaspora in Britain – the predominant view at the time was that Caribbean people had no “culture” of their own, since they were palpably the product of several different cultural traditions – English, Spanish, Dutch, Portuguese, African, East Indian, Chinese, etc. – all obliged, in the transcultural way common to this part (the lower meridian) of what Paul Gilroy might call the “black Atlantic” to – as Mary Louise Pratt puts it – cohabit in the contact zones of colonization: those

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places marked by the “spatial and temporal co-presence of subjects previously separated by geographic and historical disjunctures... whose trajectories now intersect” (1992: 7).

I was somehow unpersuaded by this argument. I realized that, in order to rebut it, I would have to look at questions of “culture” and “identity” in a radically different way. Consequently, in the period from 1954 to 1957, instead of pursuing my doctoral research, I tracked these questions through the anthropological literature on the region: the Herskovits debate on African retentions, Fernando Ortiz’s work on “transculturation” and sugar in Cuba, Pryce-Mars and others on Haiti and religious syncretism, and of course Gilberto Freyre and Roger Bastide on Brazil. I encountered Bahia for the first time in the context of this debate. And since I have pursued this question through the by-ways and hedges of my life ever since, I regard it as the “Bahian moment” in the pre-history of cultural studies.

What was distinctive about these contact zones formed by the first phase of globalization was that they were all what I would call translated societies. Without in any way wishing to underplay the historical specificity of each of these different cultural formations, they were all, in my view, diasporic societies in an important sense, that is, standing in a diasporic relationship of dissemination in the centre/periphery, colony/metropole dialectic; societies of “misplaced ideas” in Roberto Schwarz’s telling metaphor; societies of dislocation and disjuncture, temporally and spatially separated from anything that might stand, or be constructed, decisively as their places of origin; *unheimlichkeit* – literally “not at home”, as Heidegger would say. As Iain Chambers recently and eloquently put it:

from this vantage point, we can never go home, return to the primal scene, to the forgotten moment of our beginnings and “authenticity” because there is always something else between. We cannot return to a bygone unity, for we can only know the past, memory, the unconscious, through their effects: that is, when it is brought into language, and there embark on an interminable analysis. In front of the “forest of signs”, we find ourselves always at the crossroads. (Chambers, 1990: 104)

In what follows, I try to explore the particular problems of conceptualizing “culture”, “power”, identity and difference, from within this matrix: what I have called the implications of the logics of cultural translation. And, since I am not presumptuous enough to attempt to do so in relation to Brazil on the occasion of my very first “landfall”, I take a sighting on these issues from the

Caribbean point of view, which is another part of the Black Atlantic's southern meridian, in the hope that some of my observations may at least resonate with your concerns.

What light do these issues of dislocation throw on questions of cultural identity? How can we conceptualize identity and difference, power and belongingness, in the same conceptual space, together, *after* the diaspora? Despite all that has happened in critical and cultural theory to deconstruct this position, I believe we are still tempted to return to the common sense view that cultural identity is after all fixed by birth, inscribed in our racial being, transmitted through kinship and lineage. Slavery, colonization, poverty and underdevelopment may force people to migrate, but each dissemination, we believe in our hearts, carries the promise of a redemptive return. This dream has been an important element in the very idea of diaspora, inscribed as a subtext in recent Caribbean national histories: especially so in the Old Testament version – the analogue of the “chosen people” taken away by violence into slavery in Egypt; their suffering in Babylon, the leadership of Moses, followed by the Great Exodus – Bob Marley’s “movement of Jah people” – out of bondage and the return to the Promised Land. This is the great liberatory narrative of the New World – Suffering, the Exodus and the Freedom Ride. As a foundational myth it has shaped the struggles of slaves to become free men and women, with all the power that myths carry to shape imaginaries, to give meaning to our lives and struggles and make sense of lost or forgotten histories. However, foundational myths are dangerous when translated politically, as the fate of the Palestinian people constantly reminds us. Myths have the cyclical, anachronistic structure of a double inscription. Their redemptive power lies in the future. But they “work” by suturing their ends to their beginnings, their futures to their origins. The narrative time of myths is circular – “transforming history into nature”, as Roland Barthes once observed. History’s time is, though not linear, successive. Questions of identity in the Caribbean cannot be thought in a teleological way, because, with us, identity is remorselessly a historical question.

Myths concentrate and distill. Histories disperse and decentre. Our societies are composed not of one but of many peoples. Their origins are not singular but diverse. In our part of the Black Atlantic, indigenous peoples were decimated by hard labour and disease within a hundred years of colonization. The land cannot be “sacred” because it was violated: not empty but emptied. Everyone there once belonged somewhere else. Far from being continuous with our pasts, our histories are marked by violent, abrupt, ruptural breaks. Instead of the slowly-evolving pact of civil association, so central to the libe-

ral discourse of western modernity and the nation, our “civil association” was inaugurated by a brutal act of imperial will.

The Caribbean was re-born through the process of real and symbolic violence. Our pathway to modernity is punctuated by conquest, genocide, slavery, the forced insertion into the plantation system, colonial dependency, and above all, the legacy of a life lived in a remorselessly racialized world. Our cultural “routes” are diverse and impure. The great majorities are African by descent – but this descent is one which Shakespeare would have called “north-by-northwest”. We know this term “Africa” is in any event a modern construction, referring to a variety of peoples, tribes, cultures, religions and languages whose principal common point of origin lays in the confluence of slave trade. This is the “Africa” that is alive and well inserted in the diaspora; it is what Africa has become everywhere in the New World. Its cultures are the product of the most complex interweaving and cross-over of elements, synthesized through the vortex of colonial syncretism, a cultural hybridity forged in the colonial cook-pot.

I am fully aware how very different in many respects Brazil is from the picture of the Caribbean I have sketched. We are tiny islands in search of nationhood, you have a continental destiny. Your independence came early, ours came late. Yet, from what I might call a Bahian perspective, there are critical respects in which we inhabit a similar space. Our “lands and peoples” are marked by the indelible imprint of colonization and slavery. Our regions are both post-slave and post-colonial societies of cultural translation.

The term hybridity has sometimes been used (alongside others, like “syncretism” and “creolization”) to characterize these mixed and diasporic cultures of the New World. Its meaning, however, has been widely misunderstood. The term hybridity is not a reference to the mixed racial composition of such societies: even those who seem able to trace a direct line of descent elsewhere are, in my view, culturally already significantly hybridized. Nor does the term refer to individuals, who can then be contrasted as fully-formed subjects with “traditional” or “modern” ones. Rather, it is another term for the process of cultural translation, an agonistic process since it is never settled and complete, but is always “in transition”, in translation, marked by an ultimate undecidability. Hybridity is certainly not simply celebratory – even if as Salman Rushdie once remarked, it is also one of those impure routes by which “newness enters the world.” It cannot be fully celebrated because it has deep and often disabling costs, drawing them – as James Clifford once observed – from its multiple forms of dislocation and habitation. In the terms I invoked earlier, its outcomes can no longer be disaggregated into their originary elements, and so, in

that sense, it can never “go home” again. But consequently, it is haunted by a profound sense of “loss”. Nevertheless, hybridity defines the combined and uneven cultural logic of the way so-called western modernity has impacted, through conquest and forced migration, on its peripheries, since the onset of Europe’s globalizing project. It is not, Homi Bhabha warns, “simply appropriation or adaptation: it is a process through which cultures are required to revise their own systems of reference, norms and values by departing from their habitual, in-bred rules of transformation” (Bhabha, 2000: 139). Despite its often dazzling and exotic “successes”, hybridity remains an “ambiguous, anxious moment of transition that accompanies any mode of social transformation without the promise of celebratory closure or transcendence” (Bhabha, 1997: 14). And this is because, Homi Bhabha says, it “insists on displaying... the dissonances of power or position that have to be confronted; the values, ethical and aesthetic, that have to be translated, but will not seamlessly transcend the process of their transfer” (Ibid.).

I want to explore the logics of cultural translation further because I believe that, though it is currently fashionable, it is not well understood. The closed conception of culture and diaspora rests on a binary conception of difference. It is founded on the construction of exclusionary frontiers, on essentialized and racialized cooptation of the “alterity” of the Other, and a fixed opposition between us and them, inside and outside. But the syncretized configurations of Caribbean culture seem to require Derrida’s notion of *différance*... “the playing movement that produces these effects of difference;” a system where “every concept is inscribed in a chain within which it refers to the other concepts... by means of the systematic play of differences” (1982: 11). Meaning has no origin or fixed destination but is always “in play”; most significantly, its political value cannot be essentially, only positionally or relationally determined. The fantasy of a final origin, like a “true” beginning, remains haunted by “lack” or by “excess”, but is anyhow never graspable in the plenitude of its presence to itself.

I am convinced that this is *not* simply one of those “misplaced ideas” about which Roberto Schwarz has written with such eloquence and penetrative insight: it is of the utmost conceptual importance in enabling us to describe one critical aspect of the logics of cultural translation in these societies. However, I have some sympathy for the view that this, so to speak, post-modernism of the real, this post-structuralism *avant-la-lettre*, is seriously lacking in some important respects. Entranced by the fantasy that the “modernism” of the metropole will be somehow rescued by the “post-modernism” of the periphery, cultural criticism has proceeded to forget that the syncretism, hybridity or

transculturation of the margins has always and continues to take place within, and continues to be framed by, radically a-symmetrical relations of power. Transculturalization and creolization is not the periphery's empty "gift" to the centre. It is the product of the disjunctive logic which colonization, slavery and Modernity introduced into the world. These things remain, even in the post-colonial world, as the sign of an entry into history of the force which, after 1492, constituted the world as a profoundly unequal, but nevertheless "global" enterprise, making our peoples what David Scott (2004) has recently described, in his essay on C. L. R. James (the author of *Black Jacobins*, the history of the Haitian Revolution), as conscripts of modernity.

The logics of *différance*, of cultural translation, must always be read in the context of colonization, slavery and racialization; they must not be read as an alternative to, but as part of their internal logic. Forgetting the play of race and power within the dissemination of cultural difference is what has made many critics of Cultural Studies rightly critical of its flirting with post-structuralism. It is as if we are required either to emphasise colonization, power, racialized exclusion and binarism or, on the other hand, to emphasise culture, the slippage of meaning, hybridity and *différance*. This is a futile and phoney choice. Whilst holding fast to differentiation and specificity, we cannot afford to forget the over-determining moments of conquest and colonization and slavery, the *work* which these binaries were constantly required to do to *re-present* the proliferation of cultural difference and forms of life, within the sutured, over-determined unities of colonization and race. It is imperative that we hold not one or the other but the two ends of the chain in play, at the same time and in the same conceptual space: over-determination *and* difference, condensation *and* dissemination – if we are not to fall backwards into a playful deconstructionism, the fantasy of a power-less utopia of difference. We should recall that as early as the interviews reported in *Positions*, Derrida himself insisted that the terms of a binary do not stand in a neutral relationship to one another, but the marked and unmarked terms form an invisible hierarchy. It would be only too tempting to fall into the trap of believing that, because essentialism has been deconstructed *theoretically*, it has therefore been displaced *historically* and *politically*.

I want to explore this tension in two cases – those of colonization and of racism – in order to try to decypher its contradictory logic better than it has been until now. I would sum up the problem as one of failure to think the moment of colonization as an over-determination – that is, in a dominative rather than a hegemonic way (to adopt Gramsci's terms), and of refusal to think of race and racism as, through and through, a discursive system.

From this perspective, colonization was no marginal sub-plot in a larger European story, but a central thread in modernity's narrative weave. In the re-staged framework of the post-colonial, colonization assumes the place and significance of a major, ruptural, world-historical event. It signifies the whole process of expansion, exploration, conquest, colonization, slavery, economic exploitation and imperial hegemony by which Europe remade itself, constituting the "outer face", the "constitutive outside" of western capitalist modernity after 1492. In this way, the post-colonial marks a critical interruption into that grand historiographical narrative which, in liberal historiography and Weberian historical sociology and western Marxism alike, gave this global dimension a subordinate and marginal place: preferring a tale which could essentially be told from within European parameters. This renarrativization displaces the history of capitalist modernity from its European centering to its global peripheries – in the process of subordinating the famous "transition from feudalism to capitalism" which has played such a talismanic role, in Marx's formulations, to another, preferable formulation of his, "the long formation of the world market."

Undoubtedly, colonization was an act of power and domination. But it was also an enterprise to master, win over, refashion, and harness the various forms of difference it encountered and created, whilst also destroying or suppressing those who resisted the exercise of its will for power. The enterprise was to make all the different "times" of the peripheries conform to European time, to make all the spaces simulacra of Europeanized space. In fact, of course, from the closing decades of the fifteenth century onwards, there was no "homogeneous, empty, western time", in Benjamin's words. There were condensations, gaps and elisions which arise when different temporalities – while remaining "present" and "real" in their differential effects – are at the same moment rupturally centered in relation to, and obliged to mark their difference in terms of the over-determining effects of European temporalities, racialized systems of power and representation. It is this continuing tension and struggle, this persistent unevenness, which defined the *global*, in both its earlier and its contemporary globalizing moments. Indeed, far from the saturating nature of its dominations, and despite its ascendant structures of power, what finally distinguishes western Modernity is not the Universal Rule of Reason – a pretty slippery customer at the best of times – but rather this over-determined and suturing character of its power and the supplementary character of its effects. Since the sixteenth century, these differential temporalities, histories, cultures have continued to exist while being violently yoked together – and at the same time refusing simply to become "the same". Indeed, their grossly unequal and

uneven trajectories have formed the very ground of political antagonism and cultural resistance.

But antagonism, struggle and resistance themselves, while in no particular moment appearing to assume the pure form of a mutually exclusive binary element, have in fact proved impossible to disentangle, conceptualize or to narrate as separate and discrete entities. No site, “here” or “there”, in its fantasied autonomy and in-difference, could develop without, on the ground, as the very condition of its hegemonic position, being obliged to take into account its significant, abjected and excluded “Others”. The very notion of an autonomous, naturally self-produced, self-identical cultural identity – like the notion of a pure racial being or a self-sufficient economy or an absolutely sovereign polity – could not be sustained. It had indeed to be constructed again and again in and through “the Other”, through a shifting system of similarities and differences; its mode of operative power was the struggle to bring to an abrupt closure the “play” of *différance*, to halt the tendency of every fixed signifier – including those of race and culture – to go “on the slide”. The Other refused to be simply a term, hierarchically fixed, always and already in place, external to the system of power, rules and racialized identification. It became instead a positionality of differential marking within a discursive chain, a symbolically-constructed constitutive outside, whose extrusion from the system was supposed to guarantee and stabilize identity, especially national identity, within it. In fact, like all constitutive outsides, the abjected and excluded constantly returns to trouble, unsettle and disturb the settled inside. This process was organized, and reorganized, from one historical moment to another, from one generation to another, into systems of power by the mechanisms of “otherness”, exclusion and alterity – the tropes of fetishism, racialization and pathologization – which are required if differences are to be fixed and consolidated within the unifying discourses of nation and civilization.

The model here is Bakhtin’s. Bakhtin was of course profoundly attuned to heteroglossia – the proliferation of languages and cultures that particularly characterize the “Bahian zone” – though he wrote about heteroglossia in a Russian and European context. Together with Volosinov in their volume on the theory of language Bakhtin argued that there can be no pure ‘class languages’ – only class dialects or ideolects, because all class languages have to share some common features. As he put it, “it is thanks to this intersecting of accents that a sign maintains its vitality and dynamism. A sign which has been withdrawn from the pressures of the social struggle... inevitably loses its force, degenerating into allegory, and becoming the object, not of a live social intelligibility but of mere philological comprehension” (1973: 23). However,

Bakhtin also knew that language – read as “culture” – becomes “ideological” – that is, harnessed to particular positions of power – when power intervenes *in* language, in an attempt to affect the closure of meaning, to *fix* and *limit* the play of meaning, to bring to a halt the infinite semiosis of its heteroglossia, to withdraw language from “the pressures of the social struggle” (Ibid.). It is crucial, in this model, to see power and culture, *not* as forming some natural unity, *nor* as the terms of an expressive totality, nor as bound in some base/superstructure determinacy. Rather, it is important to see power and culture as *an articulation*. By articulation, I mean that culture and power are *not* the same thing, but can be linked – articulated: the connections, not being natural and inevitable, are therefore historical, specific, shifting from one configuration or discursive formation to another, having to be forged and forged again in a way that always leaves something behind – a process that has by definition this over-determined and supplementary character – and is therefore always open to contingency, struggle and change.

The discourses of race and racialization enter the picture here because – like those of gender and sexuality – they are the discourses most resistant to being conceptualized in this discursive, over-determined and supplementary way. In both gender and racialization – whether the latter is conceived primarily in genetic and biological or in ethnic and cultural terms – *Nature* is the joker in the pack: the often unspoken signifier, *the* referent through which the system of hierarchies represents itself as “natural” and closed. As such, racialization has played a crucial – albeit, historically shifting – role in colonization and post-colonial systems of power.

Conceptually, as we know, race is not a scientific category. The differences attributable to race *within* any so-called racially-defined population are as great as the differences between so-called racially different populations. Race is a political and social construct. If groups share patterns of culture and belief, it is not because of some factor transmitted in their genes, but as a consequence of living in a racialized world. This does not mean, because what we think of as the cultures of race are not genetically or biologically transmitted, that therefore race has no real effects. As the old sociological truism has it, “those things which men and women believe to be true are real in their consequences, in their effects.” Race is the organizing discursive category around which very real systems of socio-economic and cultural power and exploitation and violent exclusion have been organized. However, as a discursive practice, racism does have its own logic. It claims to ground social and cultural differences on biological and genetic differences. This naturalizing effect appears to make racial difference a fixed, scientific fact. The problem for racism, if I can put it that

way, is that the genetic level is not immediately visible, hence it cannot function as a general social vocabulary of distinction. Its hidden structure must therefore be *materialized*, so that it can be “read off” in easily recognizable, visible signifiers of the body, such as skin colour, physical characteristics of hair, features, body-type, etc. These signifiers function as discursive mechanisms of closure in everyday life. This is the process Frantz Fanon described as epidermalization – the writing of racial differences on the body, the inscription on the body. The discourses of race thus “work” by establishing an articulation, or what Ernesto Laclau called a system of equivalences between the biological and socio-cultural registers, allowing one to be symptomatically “read off” against the other. Despite the “closure” effects of its mechanisms, racial hierarchies and the discourses of racism which deploy them are in fact constantly shifting, historically: their “equivalences” being discursively reorganized, as they are historically harnessed to different configurations of power.

What this argument suggests is that culture is not a voyage of discovery and certainly not a return journey. It is not an archeology. It is a production. What the “detour through our pasts” does enable us to do is, through culture, to produce ourselves anew, as new kinds of subjects. It is therefore not a question of what our traditions make of us so much as what we have made of our traditions. Paradoxically, our cultural identities lie ahead of us. We are always in the process of cultural formation. Culture is not a matter of ontology, of being, but of becoming.

In its present, hectic and accentuated forms, the new stage of globalization is busily disentangling and subverting further its own inherited essentializing and homogenizing cultural models, undoing the limits and in the process unravelling the darkness of the West’s own “Enlightenment”. Identities thought of as settled and stable are coming to grief on the rocks of a proliferating differentiation. Across the globe, the processes of so-called free and forced migrations are changing the composition, diversifying the cultures and pluralizing the cultural identities of the old dominant nation-states, the old imperial powers, and indeed of the globe itself. The unregulated flows of peoples and cultures is as broad and as unstoppable as the sponsored flows of capital and technology. The former inaugurate a new process of “minoritization” within the old metropolitan societies whose cultural homogeneity has long been silently assumed both by those within it and by those who regarded it from outside. But these “minorities” are not effectively ghettoized. They engage the dominant culture along a very broad front. They belong, in fact, to a trans-national movement, and

their connections are multiple and lateral. They mark the end of “Modernity” defined exclusively in western terms.

In fact, there are two, quite opposed processes at work in contemporary forms of globalization, which is a fundamentally contradictory process. There are the dominant forms of cultural homogenization, by which, because of their ascendancy in the cultural marketplace and domination of capital and technological and cultural “flows”, western culture and specifically American culture, threaten to overwhelm all comers, imposing a homogenizing cultural sameness – what has been called the “McDonald-ization” or “Nike-ization” of everything in sight. Its effects are to be seen across the world, including in the popular life and culture of the Caribbean. But alongside that are processes which are slowly and subtly decentering western models, leading at the same moment to a dissemination of cultural difference across the globe.

These “other” tendencies do not (yet) have the power to confront and repel the former head-on. But they do have the capacity, everywhere, to subvert and “translate”, to negotiate and indigenize the global cultural onslaught on weaker cultures. And since the new global consumer markets depend precisely on their becoming “localized”, indigenized, to be successful, there is certain leverage in what may first appear to be merely “local”. These days, the “merely” local and the grand global are locked together; not because the latter is just the local working-through of essentially global effects, but because each has become the condition of existence of the other. Once, “modernity” was transmitted from a single centre. Today, it has no such centre. “Modernities” are everywhere; but they have taken on a vernacular accentuation. The fate and fortunes of the simplest and poorest peasant farmer in the most remote corner of the world depends on the unregulated shifts of the global market – and, for that reason, he or she is now an essential element of every global calculation. Politicians know in their hearts that the poor of the world will not be cut out of, or defined out of the claim to “modernity”. They are not prepared to be immured forever in an immutable “tradition”. They are determined to construct their own kinds of “vernacular modernities”, and these are the signifiers of a new kind of trans-national, post-national, trans-cultural consciousness.

This “narrative” has no guaranteed happy ending. Many in the old nation states, who are deeply attached to the purer forms of national self-understanding, are literally driven crazy by their erosion. They feel their whole universe threatened by change, and coming down about their ears. “Cultural difference” of a rigid, ethnicized and un-negotiable kind, has taken the place of sexual miscegenation as the primal post-colonial fantasy. A racially-driven “fundamentalism” has surfaced in all these Western European and North

American societies, a new kind of defensive and racialized nationalism. Prejudice, injustice, discrimination and violence towards “the Other”, based on this hypostacized “cultural difference”, has come to take its place alongside other racisms, founded on skin-colour and physiological difference – giving rise in response to a “politics of recognition”, alongside the struggles against racism and for social justice.

These developments may at first seem remote from the concerns of new emerging nations and cultures of the “periphery”. But as we suggested, the old centre-periphery, nation-nationalist-culture model is exactly the model which is breaking down. Emerging cultures that feel threatened by the forces of globalization, diversity and hybridization or which have failed in the way in which the project of modernization is currently defined, may feel tempted to close down around their nationalist inscriptions and construct defensive walls against the outside. The alternative is not to cling to closed, unitary, homogeneous models of “cultural belonging” but to begin to learn to embrace the wider processes – the play of similarity and difference – which is transforming culture world-wide. This is the path of “diaspora”, which is the pathway of a modern people and a modern culture. ■

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